

Good afternoon, Mr. Secretary. My name is Barry Bedwell and I am president of the California Grape and Tree Fruit League. We are a voluntary public policy organization that represents approximately 85 percent of the volume of California's table grapes and deciduous tree fruit. We very much appreciate you taking the time and making the effort to visit Central California; an area, as you know, that is arguably the most productive agricultural region in the world. We look forward to the continuing dialogue as it relates to the discussion and the formation of the 2007 farm bill.

As we recognize that this listening session is being conducted in Fresno County, the number one agricultural County in the nation, and the home to over \$4 billion of agricultural production, we would first like to emphasize that we indeed realize, as do most individuals associated with agriculture in this country, that times are indeed changing. We realize that the fiscal dynamics of our nation as well as the international impacts of worldwide agricultural trade require dynamic new thinking when it comes to how we can best produce food and fiber, for not only our nation, but for the world as well.

We would like to emphasize the growing recognition of the importance of fruits and vegetables and their role in providing nutrition and fighting obesity. The economic impact of specialty crops cannot be ignored as well. This sector comprises a majority of the total value of crops grown in the United States as well as employing almost three-quarters of the nation's agricultural workforce. In California, the importance of specialty crops is well documented in that they represent an estimated 92 percent of the state's agricultural crop production value and a like number of the agricultural workforce.

As we move forward in the 2007 farm bill discussion, there are clearly benefits to increase consumer education and awareness in consuming fruits and vegetables. We also need to recognize the importance, from many viewpoints but particularly that of national security, of the production of a domestic food supply. We will require a farm bill that will help our competitiveness, strengthen our research efforts, enhance our conservation programs and encourage investment and efficiency in all agricultural production sectors.

In addressing the specific questions that were designed for this listening session, I would like to focus, with the limited time, on the question of how U.S. farm policy can be designed to maximize U.S. competitiveness and our country's ability to compete in global markets. The association for which I work administers the export of tree fruit to Mexico. This program, which has been in existence for approximately 9 years, has grown significantly from a few thousand boxes to over 2.3 million boxes in the year 2003. However in 2004, given restrictions on how we were able to ship fruit to Mexico, the number fell to 1.3 million boxes.

The fruit that is sold to Mexico is in demand by their consumers and most observers feel that the market could double or triple the near future. However, our ability to increase exports is hindered by the reality of non-tariff trade barriers evidenced by quarantine pests lists and unreasonably high oversight costs. On the other hand, our efforts have been assisted by the existence of TASC (Technical Assistance to Specialty Crops) funds and this is an area that should be expanded. However, if we are to realize our true potential and meet consumer demand to those countries we export, U.S. farm policy must be adequately funded through the Farm Bill to meet these challenges. This is just one example of how the 2007 Farm Bill can benefit our goals. We look forward to providing more examples and working with you through this very important process. Thank you very much again for taking the time to be here today.

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Mr. Secretary; thank you for coming today. I appreciate that you wish to speak with farmers and producers across this nation about the upcoming Farm Bill. I am a livestock producer from East Central Kansas.

My concern is the delivery of the new program. A close partner in my farming operation is my local Farm Service Agency and the people who work there. They truly understand my operation and how I operate. Throughout the years my relationship with the employees at the FSA office has grown into one of trust.

The last farm bill was very difficult to decipher but the Farm Service Agency Staff was well prepared and did an excellent job in explaining the options to me. Without the face to face contact with the staff at the FSA office and the time they spent with me it would have been very difficult to make my signup elections. I hope that you will consider not changing anything in the program delivery and keep it with the Farm Service Agency.

I would also like to comment on the unintended consequences of farm bills. There is a deeper rooted problem than the amount of tax dollars allocated under a farm program. This is one of communication and education. I'm referring to the non farm consumer, the taxpayers who foot the lion's share of the program dollars. I challenge your department and all the commodity groups to address this concern. The non farm consumer/taxpayer needs to be educated in what a farm program means to them. It provides to them the most abundant, safest, and cheapest supply of food and fiber in the world. That's what they received for the very small share of their tax dollar that goes into a farm bill. Your office, Congress, and the commodity groups have failed in this area.

